

PREES HEATH
Shropshire

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Bell heather on Prees Heath Common

Prees Heath is 2 miles south of Whitchurch on the A41. It is close to the Welsh border, 20 miles west of Stoke-on-Trent and 20 miles north of Shrewsbury. Since 2006, part of the heath, called Prees Heath Common, has been owned by Butterfly Conservation.

Prees Heath Common has 60 ha (150 acres) of restored heathland, part of which is an SSSI. It is about half of the larger heath. This was once used as an airfield, but for many years most of it was ploughed for arable farming. Restoring the butterfly reserve to heathland has been going on since 2007.

TARGET SPECIES

Silver-studded Blue (second half of June and July), Common Blue, Small Copper, Small Heath, Gatekeeper, Meadow Brown, Brimstone, Purple Hairstreak, Comma, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell

Butterfly Conservation's acquisition and subsequent restoration of part of Prees Heath is a fascinating story. The reserve, which is called Prees Heath Common, occupies about half of the old heath. This was requisitioned by the government twice, during the 1914-18 war for training the army in trench warfare, and during the 1939-45 war for training RAF bomber crews. In the second role, it was known as Tilstock Airfield and had three runways, two main runways running NE to SW and NW to SE and a shorter E-W runway. To build runways across the heath, the A41 road had to be diverted. Afterwards, it was rebuilt and now forms the eastern boundary of the BC reserve. Only parts of the old NE-SW and E-W runways are within the reserve area. Both these concrete runways and their surrounding taxiways and roads have been extremely valuable for conservation. Although their concrete was broken up to prevent unauthorised use by motor

vehicles, the broken concrete was not removed, so these areas were not ploughed when arable farming began in the 1970s. This allowed heather to continue to grow where sand and gravel were exposed, and Silver-studded Blues managed to survive using only a fraction of Prees Heath.

Concern about the future of the Heath came to a head in the early 1990s when a planning application was made for sand and gravel extraction. Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Butterfly Conservation became involved and, since the Heath was the only remaining site in the Midlands where Silver-studded Blues could be still found, parts of it were declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1991. Substantial funds were raised to allow Butterfly Conservation to offer to buy part of the site. Initially their offer was refused. However they persisted, and eventually were successful in 2006. Even then, uncertainty remained until a legal challenge about rightful ownership of the land had been settled in court.

The immediate problem was that, except for the old broken-up concrete runways, all the heathland had been destroyed by arable farming. The acidic character of the topsoil had been lost by the regular application of poultry manure, so that heather could no longer grow on it. To remedy this, deep ploughing (with a special plough throwing a furrow a metre deep) was carried out to bring sand and gravel to the surface and bury the fertilized top layer. In addition, for part of the area, agricultural sulphur was spread to further reduce the soil's pH (i.e. increase its acidity). Then chopped heather cuttings harvested from Cannock Chase were spread over the surface. Seeds from these heather brushings have now germinated to give a good crop of ling (purple common heather). In addition, bell heather has been sown, both from seeds and by teams of volunteers planting thousands of small bell heather plants that had been specially grown.

This is all part of a 10-year restoration project, proceeding in stages. The aim is to return all Butterfly Conservation's reserve to how it was before the first military requisition of the Heath in 1914. Eventually the restored heathland will be self-sustaining, with controlled grazing to keep scrub invasion at bay.

Three old hangers survive, to the north-west of the site. These are not in the reserve. For many years they were used by the government for grain storage, but they are now in private ownership. The airport control office building used by RAF Tilstock is also still here. This is inside the northern end of the reserve. Although derelict, it has been made safe and is to be kept as a memorial. It was built to a standard design, using brick and pre-fabricated concrete panels. At the peak of the war, movements of heavy aircraft on the three runways were all controlled from here. Flying still continues from part of the old NW to SE runway (outside the BC reserve). The Parachute Centre Ltd (also known as Skydive Tilstock) use it for sky-diving and parachute jumping.

Prees Heath Common has become a very good site for Silver-studded Blues. In 2009, it was estimated that 7,000 were on the wing together in early July. Butterfly Conservation holds regular events each year to see them. These have included searching for butterfly eggs in March, for caterpillars in April, and for emerging adult butterflies in June, when you should see ants fussing over the butterflies as they dry their wings. Check Butterfly Conservation's website for coming events and for updates on progress of the restoration.

Starting from the main entrance at the southern side of the reserve, you can make a circular walk to take in the old main runway, the control office building, and areas of restored heathland. Depending on your detours, the distance will be around 2 miles. It is a walk on level ground, with the only obvious hazard rabbit holes. As well as butterflies and day-flying moths, look out for birds because a good number are usually seen here, including skylarks, yellowhammers, curlews, lapwings, redwings, fieldfares and green and great-spotted woodpeckers.



Prees Heath in September



Entrance to the reserve



Old runway looking north



Path into the reserve



Information board on a plinth
made of reclaimed airfield concrete



Seeded area from its south-east corner, autumn 2008



Remains of the old airport control office



Tree management along the old runway



Bell heather near the old runway in September



Enjoying the reserve



Information notice on stone marker



Entrance notice



Small Heath at Prees Heath in September



Silver-studded Blue (m) (photographed at Kelling Heath)



Silver-studded Blue (f) (photographed at Kelling Heath)



Common Blue (f) at Prees Heath, Sept. 2008



Common Blue (f) at Prees Heath, Sept. 2008

LOCATION

Explorer Map 241 Shrewsbury, Wem, Shawbury
& Baschurch
Landranger (pink) Map 126 Shrewsbury & Oswestry
Grid reference for the entrance: SJ557363

Prees Heath Common reserve is bounded by the A49 and A41 roads which meet at a large roundabout a little over 2 miles south of Whitchurch. The reserve is in the V of the two roads as they approach the roundabout, which is at the northern end of the Heath. There is a pay-and-display car park near the roundabout and facilities and refreshments are available here.

The main gate to the reserve is a mile south of the roundabout, just off the A49 on its east side. Drive down a short track which starts almost opposite the junction of a minor road to Steel Heath on the other side of the A49. There is enough space for turning and for several cars to be parked near the entrance.

Once at the entrance, you will find that there are several tracks into the reserve. Walking is easy (except for rabbit holes) and there is open access so you can go anywhere, but please observe notices about on-going conservation work. To explore the reserve you can make a circular walk, starting by walking north on the old runway, continuing to the old control office building, and then back past the old hangers (not part of the reserve) on the west side. This would be a good 2-mile walk.

Because the heath is essentially flat, larger-wheeled mobility scooters would be able to handle it, but you can get well into the reserve with normal wheelchairs.

Whitchurch and the village of Prees both have stations on the Crewe to Shrewsbury mainline railway.